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This paper develops two models of the effects of social class on educational attainment. A large body of research has documented the positive relationship between social class and educational attainment. However, research has shown that there is no relationship between graduation from the first college attended and social class. Data to test these arguments is based on interviews with 1,665 freshmen at a sample of 99 American colleges. In the first model, academic achievement is viewed as an important allocation device to occupational roles. Because of their higher occupational aspirations, we hypothesize that students from high socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds will be more adversely affected by low grades than low SES students. The data provide tentative support for this argument. In the second model, "ollege quality was seen as important for the allocation of students to occupational roles. Because ability and social class are positively related, students from high SES background are more likely to attend higher quality colleges. They in turn, have lower dropout rates than lower quality institutions, independent of students' individual social class. Data is presented that supports this argument. These arguments are integrated into a single set of propositions that link the effects of class based aspirations and those of differential institutional selection. (Author)

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Social Class, College Contexts, and Educational Attainment:

Social Class and College Dropout

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Abstract

This paper develops two models of the effects of social class on educational attainment in an effort to explain two well known findings in the literature on higher education. First, a large body of research has documented the positive relationship between social class and educational attainment. Secondly, however, research, including our own, has shown that there is no relationship between graduation from the first college attended and social class. In other words, social class is positively related to college completion in the long run, but it does not explain students' commitment to a particular college.

Data to test these arguments is based on interviews with 1665 students at a sample of 99 American colleges. The students were freshmen in 1962-63 when the data was collected. Dropout was defined as having left their original college any time between 1962 and the spring of 1966. This information was provided by the college registrars.

In the first model academic achievement is viewed as an important allocation device to occupational roles. Because of their higher occupational aspirations, we hypothesize that students from high SES backgrounds will be more adversely affected by low grades than low SES students. The data provide tentative support for this argument.

College quality is also important for the allocation of students to occupational roles. Because ability and social class are positively related, students from high SES backgrounds are more likely to attend higher quality colleges. They in turn have lower dropout rates than lower quality institutions, independent of students' individual social class. Data is presented that supports this argument.

In conclusion we integrated these arguments into a single set of propositions that link the effects of class based aspirations and those of differential institutional selection. It seems likely that this model will be useful in accounting for ultimate educational attainment.

Introduction

Past research has demonstrated that social class is strongly associated with people's level of formal schooling.[1] The explanation for this finding generally is that persons from higher social class backgrounds are more intelligent, as measured by standard aptitude tests, and that they tend to have higher educational and career aspirations than persons of lower social classes.[2] Both of these attributes--ability and ambition--increase their chances of going to college.

Thus social class is an important determinant of who goes to college. But it is at this point that the clarity and consistency of past research ceases regarding the positive effects of social class on attaining a college degree.[3] A study by Eckland has shown that social class is associated with the likelihood of graduating from some college.[4] The implication is that social class provides both the motivation and the resources to pursue a college career over a 7 or 10 year period, and ultimately to attain a degree. In the short run, however, there seems to be no agreement that social class background is positively related to graduating from the college students initially attend.[5] In other words, while it is almost a guarantee of going to college, students' class origin does not seem to have much effect, if any, on their chances of remaining in the school they first attend.

The question this research raises then is whether students' social class background has any effect on dropout, as distinguished from the later decision to transfer to another college. The high correlations between social class and educational attainment suggest that given an adequate national sample of students, we should find a positive relationship between social class and staying in college. Our own data, which we will shortly describe, show that, on the contrary, there is no relationship between social class and dropout. Using fathers' occupational status as the measure of social class, we find below virtually no relationship between class origin and dropout.

Table 1

(Father's Occupational Status and Dropout)

Occupational Status	% Dropout
Professional	36% (373)
Executive-Manager	38% (518)
White Collar	33% (236)
Blue Collar	38% (477)

N = 1665
NA = 61

Upper class students are just as likely to drop out as are those from blue collar backgrounds. Furthermore, this finding is not peculiar to this particular measure of social class.

The three other measures of social class that we used--parental income, fathers' education, and mothers' education--all produced the same results. There is, then, no direct relationship between social class and dropout.

The fact that there is no direct relationship between students' class origins and graduating from the first college attended indicates the need for a more complicated model of the effects of social class on educational attainment. Starting from the work of Sewell and others, we will develop two models to account for this surprising lack of relationship between social class and dropout.[6] Once these arguments have been developed, we will try to integrate them into a general model, and then to indicate how these variables may be useful in accounting for students' chances of eventually completing college.

The first argument is relatively simple and results in the expectation of conditional relationships between social class and dropout when academic achievement is held constant. The studies of Turner, Sewell, and others indicate that upper class students generally have higher career aspirations that make college going imperative as the means of realizing their future ambitions.[7] Within college the realization of these aspirations

largely hinges on students' academic success. The higher their occupational ambitions, the more important academic performance becomes. Grades are very important for students with high career ambitions because they indicate both the ability to perform well in high status occupational roles and the accessibility of such careers. To students with high occupational aspirations, low grades thus signify 'failure,' regardless of whether the college defines them as failing, and therefore increase the chances that these students will leave college. Thus the first argument leads us to expect that relatively low academic achievement will produce greater rates of dropout among students from high social class backgrounds than among those from lower class families.

The second point that can be developed from previous research concerns the well known relationship between social class and academic ability.[8] Students from upper class families generally have a higher average level of intelligence than those from lower class backgrounds. This increases the chance that higher class students will attend higher quality colleges. As we have shown elsewhere, and will see again, enrollment in high quality schools increases students chances of remaining in college until they graduate.[9] This argument then concerns the differential selection of students to colleges of different institutional quality. In this case we expect no conditional relationships between social

class and dropout. Social class is relevant in this line of argument only because it is an important selection device that determines the allocation of students to different quality colleges.

In sum, these are the propositions that seem most reasonable in light of previous research on social class and educational attainment. After briefly describing the data, we will next turn to the evidence for these arguments. Then we will discuss the possibility of integrating these propositions into a single model.

Research Design

Because our arguments are phrased both in terms of individual attributes and collective properties, our data had to meet two requirements. First, we needed a large sample of college students for whom a great deal of information concerning their backgrounds, aptitude, and college experience was available. Secondly, we needed a large sample of colleges roughly representative of the diversity of American higher education and a sample of students from within them for whom a great deal of personal data was available.

Data collected by William Bowers in a national survey of college students in 1962-63 satisfied both of these requirements.[10] His sample consisted of 99 colleges and 5,422 students chosen

randomly from within them. The students came from all four college classes (freshman to senior) and represent each class according to its proportion of the total student population within each college. Each college in the sample was thus represented by about 50 students from all four classes.

The present study uses as its basic sample those students in the original Bowers' study who were freshmen in the year 1962-63. The response rate for this class was 68%, resulting in an N of 1,665 students. The data on dropout was obtained from the college registrars in the spring of 1966 for the entire freshman sample (1,665). Dropout was defined as having left the school in which the student was initially enrolled any time within a four year period--from the fall of 1962 to the summer of 1966. Students were thus classified as having graduated, or still in school, or as having dropped out.

For a subsample of freshmen, data was available on students' academic aptitude as measured by standard tests of intelligence.[11]

The measure of college quality we have used is based on the proportion of applicants a college accepts out of the total number of applications for admission that it receives. The categories are: high = 0-45%; medium = 46-75%; and low = 76-100%. This measure comes from the Data Bank of College Characteristics at the Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University.

Social Class and Dropout

The first argument we developed to account for the lack of association between social class and dropout specified that we should find a conditional relationship between social class and staying in school when academic performance is held constant. Briefly, we contended that social class is positively associated with high career aspirations. For such students, academic success is a much more vital matter than for others because their career hopes are contingent upon doing well in college. The table below provides some support, and some qualification, for this argument.

Table 2

(% Dropout by Academic Performance and Social Class)

Father's Occupational Status	Freshman College Grade Average	
	B- & Up	C+ and Below
Professional	29% (145)	41% (217)
Executive-Manager	36% (203)	40% (310)
White Collar	27% (92)	36% (140)
Blue Collar	35% (215)	41% (256)

NA = 87
N = 1,665

With the exception of students from business families, i.e., the executive-manager category, academic success does tend to have more influence on students from high status families and less on those from lower class backgrounds. Though the differences are small, they are in the expected direction: -12; -4; -9; -6. Students from business backgrounds, however, seem to be exempt from the influence of grades. Perhaps this is because their aspirations, though high, are not contingent on superior academic performance. Business and managerial roles often require less formal educational training and tend to recruit candidates on many other bases than academic performance.

When parental income is used instead of fathers' occupational status as the measure of students' social class, the same finding emerges. High income intensifies the effects of academic performance on students' likelihood of remaining in school.

Table 3

(Dropout by Parental Income & Grades)

Freshman College Grade Average	Parental Income	
	Below $10,000	Above $10,000
B- & Up	34% (333)	25% (175)
C+ & Below	37% (435)	41% (269)

N = 1,665
NA = 99
DK on income = 354

When parents' income and fathers' occupational status are used jointly as measures of social class, the conditional character of the relationship between social class, academic achievement and dropout become clearer. The following table shows that academic performance has little effect on dropout for students from low income families, when fathers' occupational status is held constant. However, among students from high income families, grades have most effect on dropout for students from high status occupational backgrounds and least on those from low status families. Here again the differences are in the expected direction. They are: -25%; -12%; -13%; -7%.

Table 4

(Dropout by Parental Income, Academic Performance and Fathers' Occupational Status)

	Family Income			
	Below $10,000		Above $10,000	
Fathers' Occupational Status	Freshman College Grade Average			
	B- & Up	C+ & Below	B- & Up	C+ & Below
Professional	40% (47)	30% (71)	20% (65)	45% (95)
Executive-Manager	34% (80)	39% (92)	29% (80)	41% (130)
White Collar	25% (64)	33% (84)	24% (17)	37% (27)
Blue Collar	37% (144)	39% (192)	25% (16)	32% (19)

N = 1,665
NA = 415

When grades are held constant, there is a conditional relationship between social class and dropout among students from high income families.

This evidence does suggest that high social class background breeds career aspirations that make institutional commitment largely dependent on high levels of academic success. Thus our data do provide tentative support for the first argument.

Let us turn now to the second point. Briefly we argued that social class through its effect on intelligence scores influences the allocation of students to different quality colleges, which in turn have different capacities for maintaining the institutional commitment of their students. Social class is thus an important selection device in the distribution of students among colleges.

Elsewhere we have shown the relationship between our measure of college quality and the aptitude scores of the students they recruit, as measured by the CEEB verbal ability test.[13] As expected, higher quality schools have larger proportions of bright students. The following tables show that students are differentially distributed among these colleges both on the basis of their parents' wealth and their fathers' occupational status. Students from higher income backgrounds are more likely to attend high quality colleges and those from low income families are more apt to attend lower quality schools (cf. Table 5).

Table 5

(Parental Income by College Quality)

	College Quality		
Family Income	High	Medium	Low
Below $10,000	46%	70%	76%
Above $10,000	54% (423)	30% (439)	24% (348)

N = 1,665
NA = 419

In the case of occupational background, it is only at the extremes of occupational status that this differential selection to colleges occurs. Professionals' children are more likely to be at higher quality colleges while students from blue collar families are more likely to attend lower quality colleges. But inbetween these extremes of occupational status the distribution among colleges is quite even.

Table 6

(Occupational Status Background by College Quality)

Fathers' Occupational Status	College Quality		
	High	Medium	Low
Professional	30%	23%	14%
Executive-Manager	38%	29%	31%
White Collar	13%	17%	14%
Blue Collar	19%	31%	41%
	(484)	(585)	(441)

N = 1,665
NA = 158

When available, we will present the following table:
IQ by social class and college quality

Having seen this differential selection to college, let us turn to the effects of school quality on students from these different class backgrounds. Following we see the effect of quality on dropout when students' family income is held constant.

Table 7

(Dropout by Family Income and College Quality)

	College Quality		
Family Income	High	Medium	Low
Below $10,000	28% (193)	39% (306)	40% (264)
Above $10,000	28% (230)	41% (133)	41% (84)

N = 1,665
NA = 419

Within each quality context, the level of income their parents earn has no effect on students' chances of remaining in college; but college quality does. Students of each income level are less likely to drop out of high quality schools and more likely to drop out of low quality ones.

When we use fathers' occupational status as the measure of social class, similar results occur. As the following table shows, only in the low quality colleges is there any indication that social class has an effect on dropout independent of quality; and here the direction of this effect is opposite from that anticipated. With the exception of the blue collar students, those from lower social class backgrounds are more likely to remain in low quality schools than the children of high status families.

Table 8

(Dropout by Fathers' Occupational Status and College Quality)

Fathers' Occupational Status	College Quality: High	Medium	Low
Professional	24% (157)	41% (135)	48% (61)
Executive-Manager	31% (187)	41% (173)	40% (137)
White Collar	26% (66)	37% (101)	34% (62)
Blue Collar	28% (93)	38% (181)	45% (182)

N = 1,665
NA = 130

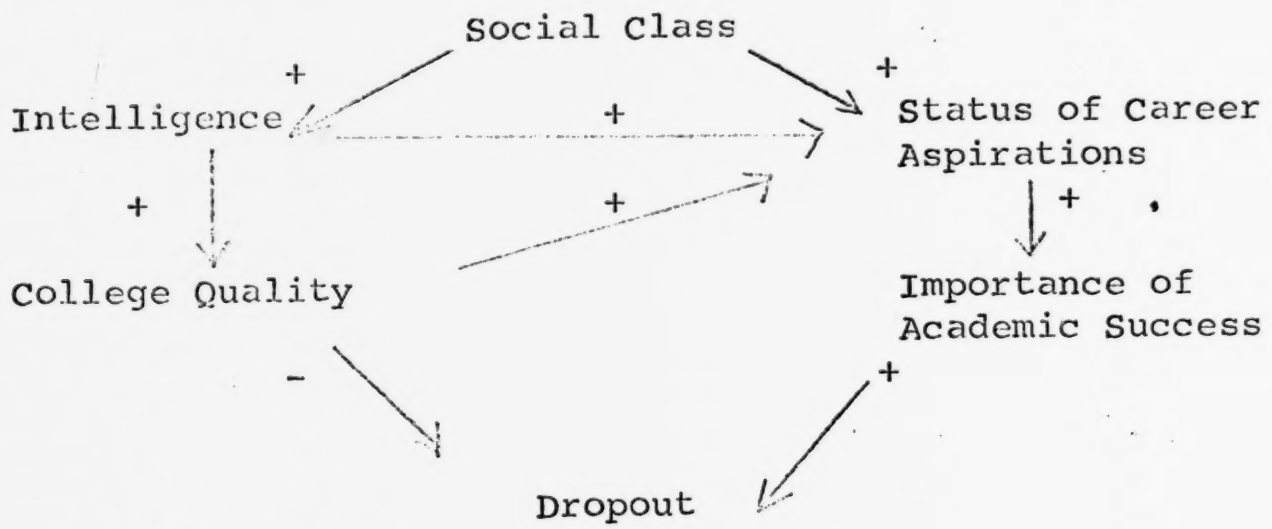
In the high and medium quality contexts social class has only small and inconsistent effects on dropout.

This table also brings to light another finding of interest. College quality has its strongest and most consistent influence on dropout among students from the top and the bottom of the status ladder. The institutional commitment of children from professional and blue collar families is most strongly contingent on the quality of the school they are attending while that of students from business and white collar backgrounds is only moderately influenced by school quality--24% and 17% as opposed to 9% and 8%.

This data provide some support for the second argument, namely that social class functions as a selection device in the allocation of students among colleges with different capacities to maintain institutional commitment.

At this point the need to link these two models becomes apparent. On the basis of the first argument, one would expect social class to increase the likelihood of dropout. But according to the second one, we would expect social class to decrease students' chances of dropping out. Both predictions cannot be right. Furthermore, we know that neither is accurate. Theoretically, it also seems reasonable to link these two arguments. Intelligence and career aspirations after all are likely to be positively associated. In other words, students with higher academic aptitudes are apt to choose higher status occupational careers. Furthermore, they tend to go to higher quality colleges which in turn have more capacity to develop these aspirations and to channel students into scientific, professional and other high status occupations.[14] The effect on dropout of these processes of selection and intellectual role development is summarized in the following model.

Figure 1



The important point to note here is the conditional character of the relationship postulated between social class and dropout, when college quality, I.Q. and academic success are held constant. In this model both social class and quality are expected over time to intensify the relationship between academic achievement and dropout.

Needless to say, the data required to fully test this model are quite complex. Not only are extremely large samples of both colleges and students needed but to establish the effects of college quality on occupational and career ambitions, it is also necessary to have this information at several different points in time. At present this kind of panel data are not available to us. One piece of evidence we do have, however, is suggestive in light of the fore-going argument.

Below we see the partial correlations between social class

and dropout when academic achievement and school quality are held constant. Using father's occupational status as the measure of social class background, we see that academic success has more influence on dropout among students of high status background in high quality schools than on students from lower status families. In the lower quality colleges, this relationship is reversed. There academic performance has more effect on lower class students' chances of remaining in college.

Table 8

(Dropout by Academic Achievement, Fathers' Occupational Status and College Quality)

	College Quality					
	High		Medium		Low	
Fathers' Occupational Status	Freshman Grade Average*					
	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
Professional	12% (65)	34% (82)	40% (43)	41% (90)	43% (30)	52% (31)
Executive-Manager	28% (68)	34% (116)	40% (73)	41% (98)	40% (52)	40% (85)
White Collar	23% (22)	23% (40)	30% (43)	45% (58)	25% (24)	40% (38)
Blue Collar	38% (34)	21% (57)	34% (82)	42% (98)	37% (85)	52% (96)

N = 1,665
NA = 158

* The grade categories here are: High = B- & Up
Low = C+ & Below

In the high quality contexts academic performance has a very strong influence on the chances of professionals' children remaining in school but none on that of white collar and blue collar students. But across quality contexts, grades become more important for the 'survival' of students from low status families and less important for those from business and professional backgrounds. Again the most dramatic differences occur at the top and bottom of the status ladder. Across quality contexts the effect of grades on dropout for high status students decreases: -22%; -1%; -9%. For those from blue collar backgrounds it increases: +17%; -8%; -15%.

In the high quality schools lower class students seem to live by the motto 'stay at all costs' while in the low quality colleges they are bound by the ethic of 'shape up or ship out.' Lower class parents and the students themselves are perhaps aware of the competition and standards prevalent at high quality schools and therefore view academic success as a relative thing. The children of professionals, however, seem to respond to academic achievement in these contexts as a zero-sum game where the winners take all. We have argued that their career aspirations are higher, thus making high levels of academic success critical for their commitment to membership. Since these interpretations all hinge on the validity of the relationships we have posited between social class, I.Q., college quality, and career aspirations, it seems wise at this point to cease speculating and to

leave the door open for future research.

In conclusion, let us sound a note of optimism. Our model has dealt only with the effects of social class on graduation from the first college students attend. However, it is well known that many students transfer or re-enroll in college after having dropped out and eventually achieve a degree somewhere. It seems to us that the variables that we have used to explain dropout are also useful in accounting for ultimate completion of college. Let us cite two examples. While high career aspirations increase the importance of academic success and produce low morale in the event of low performance, they also should increase the value of a college degree. This may account for Eckland's finding that social class is positively associated with graduation from some college.[15] Secondly, the quality of the college one first attends should also influence the likelihood of eventual graduation. Mobility in higher education is generally downward. Higher quality colleges tend to send transfers, etc. to lower quality colleges, while receiving few in return. Thus beginning college at higher quality institutions increases students' access to other schools in the event they leave the first one. These are two suggestions as to how the variables of our model may explain college completion. It remains to be see, however, whether this argument can account for the eventual attainment of a college education.

Footnotes

1. Cf. William H. Sewell and J. Armer, "Neighborhood Context and College Plans," American Journal of Sociology, 31, Apr., 1966, pp. 159-169. Their bibliography also cites a great deal of previous research on this point. For other evidence, cf. John A. Michael, "High School Climates and Plans for Entering College," Public Opinion Quarterly, 25, Winter, 1961, pp. 585-595.

2. For some recent evidence, cf. Peter Blau and Otis D. Duncan, The American Occupational Structure, John Wiley & Sons, 1967. Cf. also William H. Sewell and V. Shah, "Socioeconomic Status, Intelligence, and the Attainment of Higher Education," Sociology of Education, 40, Winter, 1967, pp. 1-24.

3. Cf. John Summerskill, "Dropouts from College," in N. Sanford, The American College, John Wiley & Sons, 1962, pp. 627-657 for a summary and review of this research.

4. For evidence on this point, cf. Bruce K. Eckland, "Social Class and College Graduation," American Journal of Sociology, 70, July, 1964, pp. 36-50. Cf. Also Bruce K. Eckland, "Ability, Education, and Occupational Mobility," American Journal of Sociology, 30, Oct., 1965.

5. Summerskill, Ibid.

6. Cf. Sewell and Armer, Ibid.

7. Cf. Ralph Turner, The Social Context of Ambition, Chandler Publishers, 1964; Sewell and Armer, Ibid.

8. Cf. Eckland, 1964, Ibid.; Sewell and Shah, Ibid.

9. Cf. David H. Kamens, "Institutional Stratification and Institutional Commitment: Contextual Effects on College Dropout," unpublished dissertation, Columbia University, 1967.

10. William J. Bowers, Student Dishonesty and Its Control In College, Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University, 1964.

11. Kamens, Ibid.

12. Kamens, Ibid.

13. Kamens, Ibid.

14. Kamens, Ibid., cf. also John Meyer and William J. Bowers, "College Effects on Student Development," Proposal submitted to the U. S. Office of Education, 1967; cf. also for evidence on these points, James Davis, Undergraduate Career Decisions: Correlates of Occupational Choice, Aldine Publishing Co., 1965.

15. Cf. Bruce K. Eckland, "Social Class and College Graduation," American Journal of Sociology, 70, July, 1964, pp. 36-50.